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Hiding behind a 'top secret' veil

Two systems of checks and balances have traditionally leavened White House power. The first one is formal, written into the U.S. Constitution: All the president's men and women must answer to Congress and the Supreme Court.

The other system is not so formal. It is, in fact, sloppy, unpredictable and sometimes unfair. But it has stopped more than one admin-

istration from continued abuses of power. It is the time-honored game of "leaking" to the press.

The Reagan administration has had quite enough of that system. So last week, it implemented a new policy: Federal employees with access to top-secret material must get prior government approval for speeches and published articles, and they must sign a pledge of secrecy. Lie detectors may be used to unmask violators.

This is a crackdown laden with disturbing implications. Certainly, there are government secrets that must be protected, particularly in the areas of defense and intelligence. But rules regulating disclosures should be drawn up with specificity and restraint. Otherwise, they come to serve as a smoke screen to conceal official deceit and folly. They serve to gag officials of conscience.

But shouldn't the designation "top secret" be protected? The answer is: not always. In practice, top-secret classification is routinely given to mundane government data (even to the White House menu once), and there are higher classification ratings.

In truth, this crackdown is part of a larger effort to limit public access to official information. The administration has asked Congress to outlaw "improper" disclosures. It has relieved classifiers of their duty to consider the public's right to know. And it continues efforts to weaken the Freedom of Information Act.

Leaks can damage national security, but they rarely do — and there are clear legal liabilities which deter actual risks to security. More often, leaks serve to reveal certain unsavory facts that an administration is trying to hide from the public. Usually, the public comes away the wiser and an administration comes away the better. It is not a tidy system, but it works.